

## **Interactions between the Native Americans and the English Colonist**

In some ways, the Jamestown colony served as the beginning of the United States of America. It was also the place where some of the first policies towards Native Americans were enacted. Many of the difficulties experienced by Chesapeake Natives were mirrored over the centuries by other Native Americans as other white settlers moved across the continent.

### **European Settlement and Conflict**

The Spanish were the first Europeans known to have explored the Chesapeake. In 1562, the Spanish cartographer Diego Gutierrez recorded the Chesapeake Bay on a map. He called it the “Bahia de Santa Maria.” Because they were looking for gold and found none in the Chesapeake, the Spanish did not spend much time in the region. They did, however, capture a number of young Powhatan boys during their expeditions. These incidents unsettled the Powhatans and raised concerns about future contact with Europeans.

The English arrived in 1607, forty-five years after the Spanish. Their colony, Jamestown, was a business enterprise funded by the Virginia Company for the purpose of finding gold. The English colonists were not adept at farming in the North American soil and climate and lacked the skills for surviving in unfamiliar territory. Many died of starvation. During this early period, the Powhatan people took pity on the colonists and gave them food to help them survive.

Peaceful relations did not last long. At first, the Indians granted the English permission to live on pieces of land within their territories. The English saw this as a right to own and permanently occupy the land. For their part, Native people believed that the newcomers had no right to permanently possess Native lands. In addition, Native people sometimes left their villages to hunt, fish, or gather resources. Frequently, they returned to their villages only to find the land occupied by colonists. The Powhatans grew increasingly angry as the colonists took over more of their lands. When the English began raiding Powhatan villages for food, sometimes killing women and children in the process, Native leaders retaliated. A series of wars started in the Chesapeake Bay region that continued through the seventeenth century.

### **Loss of Life**

In the first 100 years of contact, the Powhatan, Nanticoke, and Piscataway suffered severe loss of life. Although it is difficult to obtain precise population figures, scholars estimate that the Powhatan chiefdom included about 12,000 people when Jamestown was settled in 1607. Only 1,000 were left by 1700. The Piscataway chiefdom had about 8,500 members at the time of English settlement, but only 300 remained by 1700.

Epidemic diseases were the primary cause of death. Native peoples had no immunity to new illnesses, including smallpox, cholera, and measles, which the Europeans brought to the Americas. Many tribes suffered huge losses — often, up to ninety percent of the population was wiped out. Because diseases spread from person to person, some communities were affected by European diseases transmitted by

other Native peoples, and many populations were weakened even before contact with European settlers. In 1608, Chief Powhatan, who also was known as Wahunsenacawh, told the English explorer and trader Captain John Smith how diseases had affected his people:

“You may understand that I having seen the death of all my people thrice, and not anyone living of these three generations but myself...”

— Travels of Captain John Smith. NY: MacMillan, 1907.

Epidemics were not the only cause of death. Wars, loss of land, social upheaval, and disease combined to devastate Native communities. Population losses weakened Native culture. Oral tradition was critical for preserving cultural knowledge; when elders died, it was like having entire libraries burn down.

### **Treaties and the Loss of Land**

“They gave us a piece of land that they termed as a reservation for the Piscataway people. They put us there, with the idea that they would protect us forever, took all weapons away from us and in turn gave them to a group of Indians who swore death to us, known as the Susquehanna... We found out we couldn’t trust the Maryland colonists and our people fled.”

— Chief Billy Redwing Tayac (Piscataway), 2002.

### **1677 treaty between Virginia and Indians.**

As more and more English colonists flooded into the Chesapeake region, Native peoples lost more of their lands. These encroachments by the colonists led to violence, which the English attempted to quell by establishing treaties with Native peoples. A treaty is an agreement between two nations that becomes a law. In their treaties, the Powhatan, Piscataway, and Nanticoke agreed to submit to English control in exchange for peace. The English promised Native peoples rights to hunt in their territories and to fair treatment under the law. The treaties also set aside smaller parcels of original Native territories so that the Powhatan, Nanticoke, and Piscataway could live undisturbed by settlers. These lands were called reservations, or “manors.”

While the treaties sounded good on paper, most of their provisions were not enforced. English settlers moved onto reservation lands and restricted Native uses of non-reservation lands. By the 1700s, Piscataway, Nanticoke, and Powhatan treaty rights were largely ignored.

## Questions

1. Why did the Native Americans become concerned with the European travelers?RA
2. Name two issues that came about between the Native Americans and English settlers.RA
3. Within the first 100 years of contact between the Native Americans and English settlers, a large amount of Native Americans lost their lives. What was the primary reason for this and why?RARE
- 4."Oral tradition was critical for preserving cultural knowledge; when elders died, it was like having entire libraries burn down" Explain the meaning of this quote.RA
5. Give the definition of a treaty.RA
6. Explain the importance of the treaties between the Native Americans and the English. Were they fair and enforced?RA